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CRS Issue Statement on Afghanistan

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Upon taking office, the Obama Administration faced a deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan, despite a steady increase in U.S. forces there in recent years. Signs of deterioration have included an expanded area in which militants are operating, increasing numbers of civilian and military deaths, Afghan and international disillusionment with corruption in the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and the ease of infiltration of Taliban militants from safe havens in Pakistan. Building on assessments completed in the latter days of the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration conducted a “strategic review,” the results of which were announced on March 27, 2009. The outcome of the review leaned toward those in the Administration who believe that adding combat troops is less crucial than building governance. As part of that review, the President did announce an increase of 21,000 U.S. troops, which arrived by November 2009 and brought U.S. force levels to about 68,000. They are in partnership with about 39,000 international forces from 43 other nations, and about 190,000 Afghan security forces.

The Administration also decided that more innovative military tactics were needed to promote those goals, and in May 2009, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, was replaced by Gen. Stanley McChrystal. On August 30, 2009, McChrystal submitted his review of the situation, recommending a fully resourced, comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy in order to avoid mission failure that would require an additional 40,000 U.S. combat forces. After a second high-level review necessitated by that assessment, President Obama announced, on December 1, 2009, (1) the provision of 30,000 additional U.S. forces to begin deploying by January 2010 to “reverse the Taliban’s momentum and strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government so that they can take the lead;” (2) a conditions-based plan to draw down U.S. forces beginning in July 2011; and (3) a call for additional partner contributions.

U.S. strategy has been complicated, to some degree, by fraud conducted in the August 20, 2009, presidential election. President Karzai has emerged the re-elected leader but his second term is, to some extent, tainted by the events. This has complicated his efforts to assemble a new cabinet. As of the end of FY2009, the United States has provided over \$40 billion in assistance to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban, of which about \$21 billion has been to equip and train Afghan forces. Additional pledges may arise from a major international conference on Afghanistan to be held in London in early 2010.

In the second session of the 111th Congress, Members are likely to continue to conduct numerous on-the-ground visits to Afghanistan, as well as to consider a request for supplemental funding for the 2010 U.S. troop buildup. Members will likely also, in hearings and other formats, assess the effectiveness of U.S. stabilization efforts, including to build Afghan governance and security, to persuade Karzai to eliminate official corruption, to reduce rampant narcotics trafficking, and to develop Afghanistan’s economy. In light of the 2010 planned U.S. force increase, some Members have questioned the extent and duration of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, and such questions could take the form of proposed legislation in the second session.

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